DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 326 999 EA 022 587

AUTHOR	Toepfer, Conrad F., Jr.
TITLE	Middle Level School Grades and Program Development. Schools in the Middle: A Report on Trends and Practices.
INSTITUTION	National Association of Secondary School Principals, Reston, Va.
REPORT NO	ISSN-0276-4482
PUB DATE	Apr 90
NOTE	5p.; Colored print in section headings, on gray paper, may not film adequately. For related documents, see EA 022 586-588.
AVAILABLE FROM	Publications, National Association of Secondary School Principals, 1904 Association Drive, Reston, VA 22091 ($1.50; quantity discounts).
PUB TYPE	Collected Works - Serials (022)
EDRS PRICE	MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS	Adolescents; *Instructional Program Divisions; Intermediate Grades; Junior High Schools; *Middle Schools; School Effectiveness; School Organization

ABSTRACT

Given that the physical, emotional, and social metamorphosis of today's early adolescents differs chronologically from that of adolescents a century ago, school districts must identify the middle level school grade configuration that will best accommodate local student developmental needs. Educators must first identify the age at which local students are ready to enter the instructional and organizational environment of the middle school, paying particular attention to the needs of fifth-graders. Second, educators must determine how to deal with school building and classroom space needs, avoiding, where possible, the creation of a two-grade middle level school that offers students a fragmented educational experience. To avoid sacrificing middle level educational needs to high school program priorities in a 6-12 or 7-12 structure, educators should provide separate bell schedules, faculty, and budget categories for the middle level program and staff development based on the separate needs of the middle level and high school staff. In any setting, teachers should be involved in the planning and reorganization of the middle level school curriculum and programs. Finally, team planning and team teaching may help the students' transition into the middle level setting and reduce isolated learning of subject content. (13 references) (CLA)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

EA

a repo[redacted] in the middle; practices

National Association of Secondary School Principals

April 1990

ISSN 0276 4482

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL IN MICROFICHE ONLY HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
T. Koerner
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)"

ED326999

EA 022 587

Middle Level School Grades and Program Development

By Conrad F. Toepfer, Jr.

The term "middle level education" is most frequently used to describe schools and programs that involve combinations of grades 5 through 9 for youngsters between 10 and 14 years of age. Local districts must identify which grade configuration will allow them to develop the most effective middle level school program, keeping in mind that a school consists of programs, not grades.

The grade configuration should also take into account the ages during which youngsters in the community begin to show the characteristics of early adolescence.

Maturational Concerns

Because the chronological age at which pubescence occurs has declined by approximately four months per decade since 1900, more of the characteristics formerly experienced during the ages of 14 to 18 years are now evident in the early adolescent. Young adolescents today are also more socially aware and sophisticated than their agemates of a decade ago. However, in most cases their social-emotional maturity has not increased.

Growing numbers of elementary education authorities concur that the maturity of today's 6th graders—and even some advanced 5th graders—can be a negative influence on the younger children in elementary schools. In addition, the majority of 9th graders now have more in common developmentally with high school students than with younger middle level school students.

The Vanishing Adolescent (Friedenberg, 1959) forecast that in today's context, youngsters would need more, rather than less, positive interaction with adults during early adolescence. Building on childhood experiences, the physical, emotional, and social metamorphosis of early adolescence capstones the character, ethics, and citizenship skills of adults.

Conrad F. Toepfer, Jr. is professor in the Graduate School of Education, State University of New York at Buffalo.

Grades-in-School Concerns

Grade 6-8 schools are the fastest growing school organization in our nation, while the number of grade 7-9 schools continues to decline. Presently there are more grade 6-8 middle level schools in the United States than grade 7-8 schools, grade 7-9 schools, or grade 5-8 schools. However, districts must identify which "grades-in-school" pattern will best accommodate local student developmental needs. No single group of grades can adequately serve every district's middle level educational requirements.

The nature of the middle level and high school environments varies substantially when grades in the schools are changed.

For example, in a reorganized grade 9-12 high school, two grades (9 and 10) will be entering during its first year. Its student population will then be one-fourth younger than when it was a grade 10-12 school. High school students are usually considered sufficiently mature to adjust to a high school regimen by themselves. Unfortunately, little, if anything, is usually done to help students adjust to an earlier move into high school.

When a middle level school shifts from a grade 7-9 to grade 6-8 organization, two-thirds (both grades 6 and 7) of the student body will be new to the middle school in its first year of operation. Thereafter, the middle school population will be one-third younger than was the case in the grade 7-9 school. This is exacerbated if a district shifts from grade 7-9 to grade 5-8 middle level schools..

Deciding whether a grade 5-8, 6-8, or 7-9 unit is most effective in the districtwide organizational structure requires local decisions on two issues.

First, educators must identify the age at which local students demonstrate their maturity and readiness to move out of the elementary school environment and program. If it is judged that 6th graders will be better served developmentally by moving into a middle level school structure and program, the issue is clear. Similar readiness of 5th graders should be confirmed before reorganizing into a grade 5-8 configuration.

Difficulties develop when districts quickly decide to extend effective grade 6-8 programs to include grade 5. Adding 5th grade to existing grade 6-8 schools considerably increases the span of developmental maturity in that school's environment. Does maturation among local 5th graders make their placement more appropriate in a grade K-5 or 5-8 setting? Student readiness for the instructional and organizational environment of the middle level setting must be specified.

Needs of developmentally precocious 5th graders are usually best served in moving them to the middle level school. A reorganized K-4 program becomes more child-centered if the behaviors of 5th graders are sufficiently advanced as to conflict with developmentally younger children. There is usually more concern about what 2nd graders face in dealing with street-wise 5th or 6th graders than about how 5th and 6th graders deal with 7th and 8th grade students.

Slower maturing 5th and 6th graders must understand and adjust to the more mature level they are approaching. They and their more precocious agemates must understand that the wide range and extremes of physical growth and development individuals may experience at this time is normal.

As students understand this diversity, they should become less anxious about their own developmental rates. They should also learn to be more accepting of peers who are at different developmental stages (Beane and Lipka; 1986, 1987).

Second, educators must identify how to deal adequately with school building and classroom space needs. In some districts the community either cannot or will not finance new school buildings. This can force the movement of grades 5 to the middle level school building(s) to alleviate elementary school crowding.

What if 5th graders are not yet ready for the developmental and instructional shifts in the middle level school program? Fifth graders require an elementary-oriented program well-suited to their developmental needs in an area separated from the other students. Different scheduling and hall passing times for grade 5 should also be considered. In that way, neither the developmental nor program needs of 5th graders will be frustrated. This will require adequate planning and financial underwriting.

Students should also be prepared in the terminal elementary school grade for their transition into the middle level school program the following year. Boards of education, parents, and professional staff members must consider this in reorganizing the grades in the district's school. Articulation of the elementary program with the reorganized middle level program requires planning between educators from both units.

Entering middle level school students spend much of their first year adjusting to organizational, instructional, and environmental changes from elementary school. The second year their learning is enhanced in a familiar setting and environment.

A special consideration is the two-grade school, which has a 50 percent turnover of the student body each year. Movement and adjustment to high school is more difficult for students from two-grade middle level schools because they have a less extended and more fragmented middle level educational experience than students in three-grade schools. Students in middle level schools with three or more grades gain additional educational experience in a known environment. Logistic and economic needs are the sole reason for two-grade middle level schools.

Multiple Schools and Programs in a Single Building

The effectiveness of a school's program resides in the degree to which it is based upon the developmental needs of the students served by that program. This is also affected by the school staff's awareness of the educational implications of the developmental level of the students.

When middle level and high school programs are housed in a single building, the former seldom receive parity of support. This is further exacerbated when separate faculty members and administrators are not provided for each program level. The focus of support systems, allocation and use of facilities, and emphasis on staff development usually favor the high school.

Grade 6-12 or 7-12 patterns frequently overlook the learning and developmental needs of students in the middle level grades. Teachers with both middle level and high school classes are seldom able to put their high school focus fully aside when teaching younger students, because it is difficult for teachers to "shift gears" and deal discretely with the different instructional needs of both populations.

Wherever possible, teachers should be given *either* high school *or* middle level teaching schedules. Ideally, teachers who must teach both middle level and high school sections should teach their middle level courses before their high school courses. It is easier for teachers to "shift up" to high school class focus after middle grades classes than the reverse. Where such scheduling is not possible, teachers have benefited from having a planning period after their last high school course and before their middle school sections.

Separating middle level and high school teaching loads can also be facilitated if individual teachers are certified in two content areas (e.g., English and social stud-

ies). The core curriculum model where those teachers offer both subjects to single classes of students during consecutive periods has also reduced split high school-middle grades teaching loads.

This is not to say that these conditions cannot be overcome. A grade 6-12 or 7-12 structure could be planned to provide:

- Separate faculty members for both the middle level and the high school programs and, if possible, an administrator primarily concerned with the middle level program
- Staff development needs based on separate needs of middle level and high school staff members
- Separate bell schedules to isolate high school students
- Division of the facility, with transition and bridging possible through planning and design
- Budget categories separated to ensure that the high school does not prey upon monies needed to develop and extend middle level school programs.

While possible, grade 6-12 or 7-12 school programs seldom deal adequately with these five concerns. Schools organized on this basis should provide a protective custody that respects early adolescent, maturing adolescent, and young adult educational needs in a single school setting. All too often such efforts merely combine and reduce administrative, curriculum, pupil personnel, and other supports.

School districts must define a local middle level educational identity based on early adolescent needs separate from those of high school learners. The needs of both programs housed in the middle level/senior high school can be specified. The parity of middle level educational needs in the building must not be sacrificed to high school program priorities.

Developing a grade 6-12 or 7-12 building that meets the educational needs of both the middle level and high school is also costly. The savings actually realized seldom justify loss of effective middle level and high school programs in separate settings.

In smaller communities, K-12, K-6, and 7-12 patterns persist out of necessity. K-8 schools do not serve middle level program needs as well as they do elementary school program needs. The number of middle level grades students in K-8 settings is usually too small to warrant the diverse program needed in middle level grades.

The recent Task Force Report of the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (Hornbeck, 1989) indicates that properly planned, separate middle level schools best serve the developmental learning needs of their students.

Instructional Organization Issues

Krug (1950) stated that to be effective, curriculum planning and school program development must be a "continuous, cooperative, comprehensive process dealing with concrete issues." This is particularly true in today's information society if time and resources put into middle level school program reorganization are to achieve their desired results.

The success or failure of such changes ultimately depends on the degree of teacher involvement in determining such changes. Reorganization of middle level instructional patterns is most effective when teachers play a major role in planning those approaches.

Instructionally, middle level schools should be "teaming schools." Teaming should not necessarily be construed as team teaching; the teaming of teachers to plan and develop programs for those whom they commonly teach should be the initial concern. Such planning can define a solid foundation for real classroom "team" teaching rather than "turn" teaching.

Departmentally organized instruction separates learning within content areas. On the other hand, teaming can integrate learning among areas and reduce isolated learning of subject content.

Deciding how teaming in the middle level school's entry grade should differ from procedures in later grades must be determined.

For instance, two-teacher teams in the entry middle level school grade can ease the transition from the self-contained regimen of the elementary school. This may also better prepare students for extended team arrangements in later middle level grades. However, helping students adjust to changes in progressing through the middle level school also requires staff attention in team planning time.

For instance, one such approach begins with an introductory team program in 6th grade, followed by a 7th and 8th grade team experience continued during a two-year, 80-week cycle. This requires that 7th grade teams remain with their students through 7th and 8th grade. Following this two-year cycle, students move on to the high school while the teacher teams pick up new 7th graders for another two-year cycle.

In this way, students have a group of teachers who know and work with them for 80 rather than 40 weeks over two years. Young adolescent identity development is enhanced when classes and teaching teams move together through those two years. Teachers better understand the growth and development that young adolescents experience during that time.

Data (George, Spreul, and Moorefield, 1987) strongly recommend the extension of student-teacher relationships beyond one year. This writer (1982) described a procedure for organizing two-grade middle level schools in such a manner. Middle level school programs with sufficient numbers of students and staff might find this an attractive possibility.

Conclusion

Middle level schools must focus on local implications of the middle level school program organization. This must define program identity based upon what youngsters *can* do and achieve as they pass through their middle level school years. That identity must be separate

from both the elementary and high school and be articulated with the identities of both the elementary and the high school programs (Toepfer, 1986).

Developing a Mission Statement for the Middle Level School (Johnston, et al., 1987) can assist with that process. That mission must, of course, be grounded in the developmental levels of students in the local middle grade program.

Finally, let us remember that total educational effectiveness is best served when elementary, middle level, and high school programs are bridged. The advantages and disadvantages in the grade combinations included in each school level should be clearly identified. Grade configurations do affect the ability of middle level school programs to ease the transition from elementary to high school programs.

References

Beane, James, and Lipka, Richard. *When the Kids Come First: Enhancing Self-Esteem.* Columbus, Ohio: National Middle School Association, 1987.

———. *Self-Concept, Self-Esteem, and the Curriculum.* New York: Teacher's College Press, Columbia University, 1986.

Braddock, John; Wu, Susan; and McPartland, James. *School Organization in the Middle Grades: National Variations and Effects.* Baltimore, Md.: The Center for Research on Elementary and Middle Schools, Johns Hopkins University, March 1988.

Coldiron, J. Robert; Braddock, John; and McPartland, James. *Description of School Structures and Classroom Practices in Elementary, Middle, and Secondary Schools.* Baltimore, Md.: The Center for Research on Elementary and Middle Schools, Johns Hopkins University, April 1987.

Epstein, Joyce. "What Matters in the Middle Grades—Grade Span or Practices?" *Phi Delta Kappan,* February 1990.

Epstein, Joyce, and MacIver, Douglas. "The Middle Grades: Is Grade Span the Most Important Issue?" *Educational Horizons,* Winter 1990.

Friedenberg, Edgar. *The Vanishing Adolescent.* Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 1959.

George, Paul; Spreul, Melodie; and Moorefield, Jane. *Long-Term Teacher-Student Relationships: A Middle School Case Study.* Columbus, Ohio: 1987.

Hornbeck, David (Chairman). *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century.* Washington, D.C., Carnegie Commission on Adolescent Development, 1989.

Johnston, J. Howard; Arth, Albert; Lounsbury, John; and Toepfer, Conrad, Jr. *Developing a Mission Statement for the Middle Level School.* Reston, Va.: National Association of Secondary School Principals, 1987.

Krug, Edward. *Curriculum Planning.* New York: Harper & Row, 1950.

Toepfer, Conrad, Jr. "Middle Level Transition and Articulation Issues." *Middle School Journal,* November 1986.

———. "Organizational Strategies for Two-Grade Middle Schools." *Dissemination Services on the Middle Grades.* Springfield, Mass.: Educational Leadership Institute, Inc., May 1982.

Schools in the Middle is a publication of the National Association of Secondary School Principals, 1904 Association Dr., Reston, Va. 22091. Individual subscriptions are not available. Additional copies may be ordered: single copies, $1.75 each; 2-10 copies, $1.25 each; 11-99 copies, $1 each; 100 or more, 85¢. Payment must accompany orders of $15 or less.

JOHN A. LAMMEL, *President, NASSP*
TIMOTHY J. DYER, *Executive Director*
GEORGE E. MELTON, *Deputy Executive Director*

THOMAS F. KOERNER, *Director of Publications*
CAROL BRUCE, *Association Director of Publications*
PATRICIA LUCAS GEORGE, *Editor*